

## **NAATI Accreditation for Translators in Australia: Theoretical Underpinnings and Practical Implications**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A mismatch exists in expectations about the requirements of translation between NAATI and those attempting the NAATI test, be they translation practitioners, graduates from translation training programs. This article will examine issues concerning NAATI accreditation for Translators at the professional level in terms of the relevant theoretical frameworks of translation, and assess translation practice in the real translation world, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the NAATI Translator test, its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications.

### **INTRODUCTION**

**I**n Australia, the initial competence level of translators is to a large extent guided and governed by the *National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI)*. Until now, "NAATI accreditation [has been] the only qualification officially accepted for the profession of translation and interpreting in Australia" (NAATI, 2002: 1). Accreditation by NAATI at the level of Translator is generally regarded by translation practitioners, translation clients, translation service providers, and the translation profession at large as a yardstick for measuring a translator's initial competence. NAATI accreditation is becoming increasingly sought after, both domestically and globally. However, there has been some confusion about the requirements of the NAATI test. As a consequence, many candidates, including some who have worked as translation practitioners for a number of years, have failed the NAATI test. In addition, some graduates who have received their translation training in other than NAATI-approved programs also find it difficult to pass the test.

There seems to be a mismatch in expectations about the requirements of translation between NAATI and those attempting the NAATI test, be they translation practitioners, graduates from translation training programs not approved by NAATI, or candidates from other academic disciplines who want to become NAATI Translators. So what are NAATI's expectations in the test and why? Are NAATI's expectations compatible with the requirements of real

translation work<sup>1</sup>? And, if not, why not? This article will examine issues concerning NAATI accreditation for Translators<sup>2</sup> at the professional level (formerly known as Level 3) in terms of the relevant theoretical frameworks of translation, and assess translation practice in the real translation world, in order to contribute to a better understanding of the NAATI Translator test<sup>3</sup>, its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications.

## **SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE PASS RATE FOR THE NAATI TRANSLATOR TEST**

The NAATI Translator test is open to candidates from any disciplinary background ranging from translation, language and literature to economics, engineering and law, provided that they “have general education to degree or diploma level” or “demonstrated work experience attested to by an employer, or evidence of relevant post-secondary studies” (NAATI, 2002: 9). However, the pass rate for the NAATI Translator test is not high. In order to obtain a good understanding of the NAATI Translator test and relevant issues, it will be helpful to get a brief idea of the pass rate for the test. The following observations are based on both the author’s anecdotal experience and official NAATI statistics.

One candidate known to the author is a graduate of the English language and literature department of an overseas university and has been working as an in-house translator in a government body in his home country for about 10 years. He translates in two language directions, that is, from English into his mother tongue and vice versa. The translation tasks include various government documents and reports, business correspondence, scripts of speeches, and so on. At the time of writing, the candidate is studying for a PhD degree at a university in Australia. Although the candidate’s educational background cannot be considered as equivalent to translation competence, it does indicate that the candidate has a good command of both the two languages and translation skills. However, the candidate attempted the NAATI Translator test in Australia twice and failed. He is now reluctant to try again.

Another candidate worked as a journalist and translator in an overseas country. She has done extensive translation work for the media. Her IELTS<sup>4</sup> score is 7, which is acceptable to most universities in Australia for entering postgraduate studies. She has also completed an MA degree in journalism in Australia. Again, the candidate’s background indicates that she has a reasonable level of bilingual competence. She has attempted the NAATI Translator test twice and failed. She later attended NAATI’s workshops on test preparation and translation practice before attempting the test a third time and receiving a low pass.

Official statistics on the pass rates in NAATI tests can be found in NAATI’s Annual Reports.<sup>5</sup> These reports show that in the years 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 the overall pass rate for Translator tests (including annual program tests, special

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on-demand tests and overseas tests) into English and LOTE was just below 20 percent. In the *Annual Report for 2003/04*, NAATI did not provide a breakdown of the number of candidates attempting the test at each level and how many candidates passed the test that level. Instead, only a total number of candidates sitting the annual test, special on-demand tests and tests at overseas locations was provided, with no breakdown into the categories of Paraprofessional Translator or Interpreter, Translator or Interpreter, and Advanced Translator or Conference Interpreter. The total number of candidates who were awarded accreditation at different levels was then provided. This figure included those who received accreditation based on assessment of their overseas qualifications or by graduating from a NAATI-approved course. It is therefore impossible to work out the pass rate for any particular level or category in this particular year. However, considering the fact that neither the number of candidates for Paraprofessional Translator and Interpreter and Advanced Translator and Conference Interpreter nor the number of candidates who received accreditation at these two levels is large – 317 and 13 respectively, compared with 1095 for Translators and Interpreters – it is still possible to determine an approximate pass rate for Translators and Interpreters after removing the number of accreditations by assessment of overseas qualifications and course graduations. The combined pass rate for Translator and Interpreter tests in 2003/2004 was around 21.8 percent – very close to the combined pass rate for Translator and Interpreter in 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. It can therefore be concluded that the pass rate for those who sat the NAATI Translator test from 2001 to 2004 was around 20 percent.

These observations raise a number of questions about the NAATI Translator test, particularly for those who have attempted the test and failed, and those who plan to attempt the test in the future. For instance, why is the NAATI test so hard to pass? How does the NAATI test relate to real translation work? Does NAATI mark the test too hard? Do candidates who are competent bilingually need proper translation training? Are translation training programs or courses other than those approved by NAATI compatible with NAATI's requirements in terms of the criteria, principles and strategies adopted in translation? Do practising translators followed by different principles and rules in their work from those expected by NAATI? There are no simple answers to these questions without extensive investigation and analysis. However, an examination of the NAATI test and some of the requirements of some examples of real translation work will help lead to a better understanding of the links and gaps between the two.

### THE NAATI TRANSLATOR TEST

Translation can be divided into two major types: literary translation and document translation. However, the precise division into literary works and documentary works can be difficult because the same text can contain sentences and paragraphs in different styles. Some researchers, such as Reiss (1977, 1981), have endeavored to provide a detailed classification of text types for translation purposes, but there will always be texts of a mixed nature that cannot

be easily classified. For the same reason, it is almost impossible to draw a clear line between literary translation and document translation. In spite of this difficulty, a broad definition of these two types of translation could help candidates who plan to attempt the NAATI test to understand the requirements of the test and adopt appropriate translation strategies.

In this article, literary translation refers to the translation of literary works, such as novels, plays and poems, where readability is usually strongly emphasized and extensive modification and alteration may be necessary in translation in order to create a similar impact on readers from different cultural backgrounds. Document translation refers to the translation of various kinds of documents which are largely based on factual information, such as brochures and newsletters of community organizations, government policy papers and reports, legal documents, business correspondence, operating manuals, public notices, information sheets and instructions for taking medication. In document translation, translators are required to maintain a high level of accuracy while maintaining the natural flow of expression in the target language. A basic principle to be followed in document translation is that on the one hand everything that carries meaning in the source language – words, tense, mood, etc – must be conveyed without significant distortion of meaning, unjustified addition or omission, while on the other hand, the expression in the target language must be natural and idiomatic. At the same time, other important elements such as style and register should not be sacrificed.

According to NAATI, Translators are expected to “work across a wide range of subjects” and undertake translation work including “routine correspondence, reports, standard text material in the general field of scholarship” and “non-specialised scientific, technical, legal, tourist and commercial subjects” (NAATI, 2002: 6). Basically, Translators are expected to be able to translate all documents of a generic nature, except for literary works and “specialist material for specialists” (NAATI, 2002: 7), and “the passages may be drawn from subject areas including culture, science, technology, health, law, commerce and related fields all aimed at the non-specialist reader” (NAATI, 2002: 22). This is confirmed by the translation passages in NAATI’s Translator Sample Test, which includes, for example, topics such as “Report on the Australian-Japan Relationship: Towards the Year 2000”, “Future Health Options”, “Databases and Privacy”, “Australians and Languages”, “King Cocaine” and “Students, Business and Industry” (NAATI, 1996)<sup>6</sup>. Clearly, the NAATI Translator test is characteristic of document translation, so the principles of document translation described above should apply to translation in the NAATI test.

Furthermore, NAATI expects candidates for the Translator test to “convey *the full meaning* of the information from the source language and into the target language in the appropriate *style and register*” (NAATI, 2002: 3) [emphasis added]. Here, extreme care must be taken by candidates attempting the NAATI test to understand the definition of “full meaning, style and register”, as this is probably an area in which some candidates do not share NAATI’s understanding

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of the requirements and therefore make mistakes. The picture becomes clearer if we look at NAATI's guidelines for marking translation tests. According to NAATI,

Marks are deducted in translation tests for:

- mistranslations
- inappropriate vocabulary
- incorrect punctuation
- incorrect grammar
- incorrect spelling
- distortion of meaning
- unidiomatic usage
- stylistic infelicities

.....

*Where the use of capital letters differs between English and the other language, candidates must use them correctly in each language. If translations are written using all capital letters, the examiners will assume that the candidate is unaware of the correct use of capital letters and will penalise the translation accordingly.*

(NAATI, 2002: 15-16)

Obviously, NAATI emphasizes a high level of accuracy. Even incorrect punctuation and spelling will result in the deduction of marks, to say nothing of wrong word choice or mistranslation of a sentence. This strong emphasis on accuracy should alert candidates to take extreme care in their translation.

While marking translation papers, NAATI examiners, in addition to making individual comments, are required to use a list of items on a result sheet to indicate areas where the candidate has performed poorly. With the permission of NAATI, the relevant items in the result sheet are quoted here:

### **Reasons for Poor Performance:**

#### **Accuracy**

Significant omissions

Significant mistranslations

Significant unjustified insertions

Failure to complete passage

#### **Comprehension of original**

Misunderstanding vocabulary

Misunderstanding grammatical features

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Misunderstanding sentence structures

### **Expression of translation**

Inappropriate/inexact word choices

Grammatical errors

Inappropriate/awkward sentence structures

Non-idiomatic usage

Errors of spelling/script/characters

Errors of punctuation/capital letters

### **Technique**

Translated too literally in some segments

Translated too freely/paraphrased in some segments

(NAATI, 2005: 5.2-17)

From this list, we can see that NAATI's expectations are actually very detailed and specific. NAATI obviously attaches great importance to accuracy because it puts this heading first on the list. Nevertheless, a high level of naturalness of expression in the target language is also required. Unidiomatic usage and expression, awkward sentence structures and inappropriate use of style and register will result in the deduction of marks. Hatim and Mason (1990: 39) give this pair of sentences to illustrate differences in register: "I hereby declare the meeting open" and "Shall we make a start now?" The two sentences have the same meaning, but are in different registers, the former being formal and the latter informal. According to NAATI's guidelines, the different registers in the two sentences must be maintained in the translation, although in real translation work the change in register between the two sentences may be acceptable, depending on the needs of the client.

Furthermore, in the area of accuracy, NAATI endorses the code of ethics developed by the Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (AUSIT) and stresses that this code "represents a national code of ethics", suggesting that it "should be recognized by all practising interpreters and translators in Australia" (NAATI, 2001: 4). The AUSIT code of ethics clearly specifies that translators "shall not alter, make additions to, or omit anything from their assigned work" and should convey even "patent untruths" accurately as presented.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of translation techniques, NAATI does not encourage translations that are either too literal or too free. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult for translators to find a balance between the two. NAATI's expectations in the usage of translation techniques convey the message that NAATI demands a high level of both accuracy and naturalness of expression in its Translator test. So candidates attempting the Translator test should be aware of this and aim to be both

accurate and natural, not only at word and sentence level, but also at the level of the whole text, in terms of lexis, grammar, syntax, style and register.

### **THEORETICAL BASES FOR THE NAATI TRANSLATOR TEST**

Although the NAATI Translator test does not contain any theoretical components, NAATI's requirements of translations are supported by some translation theories. The most relevant theories are those in the field of equivalence, including in particular Eugene Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence (Nida, 1964a, Nida and Taber, 1969), Peter Newmark's semantic and communicative translation (Newmark, 1981, 1988) and Mona Baker's approaches to equivalence in translation at different levels (Baker, 1992).

*Nida proposes that in formal equivalence, attention should be focused on "the message itself, in both form and content... One is concerned that the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language... The translator attempts to reproduce as literally and meaningfully as possible the form and content of the original", while in dynamic equivalence, attempts should be made to "produce a dynamic rather than a formal equivalence... In such a translation, one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source-language message, but with the dynamic relationship..., that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message. A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression..." (Nida, 1964a: 159).*

In more or less the same vein, Newmark speaks of semantic and communicative translation, and states that "communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original" (Newmark, 1981: 39). Newmark further emphasizes that "in communicative as in semantic translation, provided that equivalent effect is secured, the literal word-for-word translation is not only the best, it is the only valid method of translation".

Baker (1992) gives a detailed description of translational equivalence at various levels, including equivalence at word and above-word levels, grammatical equivalence, textual equivalence in terms of thematic and information structure and cohesion, and pragmatic equivalence.

The theory of equivalence maps out a broad spectrum of text types, from legal documents to literary works such as poems. The NAATI Translator test can be located within this spectrum, but more towards the area of formal equivalence and semantic translation (in terms of Nida and Newmark's strategies), in which a high level of accuracy is emphasized. Of course, when a translator finds that formal equivalence or semantic translation does not work or is likely to sound

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abnormal or nonsensical to readers, he/she needs to adopt translation strategies more in the direction of dynamic equivalence or communicative translation so that the translation will be understood by its readers. Candidates attempting the NAATI test should be aware of this, and seek to make their translations both accurate and natural.

The reason that the NAATI Translator test emphasizes accuracy and naturalness to such an extent relates largely to the end products that Translators will produce in their real translation work and the likely impact of the translated documents on the clients and the community. In their real translation work, Translators can be asked to translate legal documents such as witness statements. The accuracy of such translations can have a bearing on court decisions, and Translators may be held responsible for mistranslations. The high level of accuracy required in the NAATI test aims to ensure that such mistakes are eliminated or reduced to a minimum.

## TRANSLATION IN THE REAL WORLD

It is important to note that the NAATI Translator test is independent of almost all external influences. The only external factor that could influence the test could be the judgment of examiners. It can be argued that examiners may be subjective and influenced by their personal preferences when marking translation tests. For instance, due to personal preferences, one examiner may consider certain choices of words inappropriate, but these may be considered acceptable by translation clients or fellow translators in the real translation world. NAATI has taken this issue into account, and stipulates that “all NAATI tests are marked by at least two (2) examiners and sometimes by three (3) examiners, who adhere to standard marking guidelines prescribed by NAATI” (NAATI, 2002: 15). In addition, NAATI conducts workshops for examiners every year to discuss various issues relating to the test, including marking, in order to ensure the highest possible level of consistency. Although the issue of examiners’ subjectivity cannot be eliminated completely, NAATI has endeavored to reduce it to a minimum.

However, in the real translation world, translators are subject to many factors. A common factor influencing translators is likely to be the requirements of the client. Although translators will mostly observe the general rule of conveying the meaning accurately and maintaining naturalness of expression, sometimes they may have to bend this rule to meet their clients’ specific requirements. The following section examines two situations that could arise in the real world.

## CASE STUDY 1

A translator has received an English document for translation from a local city council. The document is about the council’s plan to expand and renovate its city centre and seeks the support of local residents, many of whom are migrants from non-English-speaking countries and are poorly educated. The document is formal and contains some terms that relate to civil engineering, architecture and



finance. So that the non-English-speaking residents will be able to understand the plan, the council specifically instructs the translator to use simple language in the translation, and to refrain from using long and complicated sentence structures.

## CASE STUDY 2

A translator has received a newsletter from an organization for translation, via a translation agent. The organization has a bilingual employee who believes that he/she has a good knowledge of the business of the organization but is not a NAATI Translator. After receiving the translation submitted by the translator, the organization asked this bilingual employee to check it. Based on his/her understanding of the operations of the organization, the bilingual employee *edited the translation extensively, including making some additions and omissions*. As a result, the translation was changed to a much freer style than is usual for a document translation. The organization sent the translation back to the translator via the agent, requesting that the employee's changes be incorporated. The translator *accepted some of the changes proposed by the bilingual employee*, but argued that other changes, such as the additions and omissions, were not accurate translations of the original document. However, the bilingual employee insisted that all of the changes must be incorporated to reflect the practices of the organization. The translation agent also pressed the translator to accept the changes, because otherwise the client would not be happy and the agent might lose the customer.

In Case 1, if the translator follows the instructions of the client and uses simple language to translate the formal document, the register of the source language will be changed or modified. However, the client's request is legitimate and reflects the actual needs of the readership. So if the translator chooses to follow the client's requirements and *change the style or register of the original document*, he/she is influenced by the client in producing the translation. If we examine this situation against NAATI's expectations and AUSIT's code of ethics, we find that the principle of accuracy has been compromised to some degree in terms of maintaining the original style and register.

The scenario in Case 2 is more difficult for the translator to deal with. Of course, according to AUSIT<sup>8</sup>, translators are advised to quit a job if the code of ethics cannot be observed. The translator in Case 2 could choose to quit, but this may mean that the translator will not only lose any future opportunity to work for this organization, but will also be excluded by the translation agent from future translation work on the grounds of inflexibility and jeopardizing the business of the agent. *If the translator accepts all of the changes proposed by the client*, he/she is not conveying the meaning accurately.

This said, I do not mean to imply that such a translator is of lower competence and his/her translation is of poor quality. The requirements of clients are real and hard to ignore. External and market factors certainly have a bearing on translation strategies and do influence translators. Some researchers such as

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Holz-Manttari (1986, quoted in Munday 2001); Vermeer (1989) and Venuti (1992, 1998) have looked into this area and developed “translational action” and “skopos” (aim/purpose) theories that relate to determining factors in translation. Such theories point out that translation is driven by its outcomes and/or purposes and is controlled by factors such as the needs of the receivers, clients, publishers, readers and translation agents (Munday, 2001: 79-80 and 153-154). However, such practice is different from NAATI’s test requirements. If a translator is doing this kind of translation on a regular basis and has developed a relatively “free” style of translation, it would be difficult for him/her to meet NAATI’s requirements if he/she used the same style when sitting the Translator test.

## TRANSLATION PROGRAMS

Translation training programs play an important role in training translators. However, it is important to note that not all training programs produce graduates along the lines of NAATI’s expectations. In Australia, some translation training programs are approved by NAATI, and these programs strictly follow NAATI requirements in training their translators. Such requirements cover areas such as program duration, minimum number of hours of training in translation, language consolidation, field practice, resources and qualification of teachers (for example, The University of Queensland, 2005; RMIT, 2000; University of Western Sydney, 2005; Deakin University, 1995, 1997). The results of the final examinations in these programs are linked to accreditation, and are moderated by NAATI. Students in these programs receive intensive training in the framework of NAATI’s expectations. Therefore, graduates who have successfully completed the NAATI-approved programs and passed their final examination will be able to meet the threshold competence requirements of NAATI for Translators.

There are other translator training programs or translation courses in other disciplinary programs around the world. Since the NAATI test is unique to Australia, it is yet to be investigated whether NAATI’s requirements are accepted by and incorporated into every translation training program around the world. For instance, some training programs may focus on the translation of literary works and developing the skills needed for literary translation; some training may be conducted to suit the needs of particular disciplinary areas such as the media and film subtitling. It is therefore likely that such training will not be conducted strictly according to NAATI’s requirements for training Translators, and graduates from such programs or courses may not fully meet the NAATI test requirements. This does not mean that these programs and courses are of a lower standard, but that they may observe different principles, adopt different pedagogies, focus on different aspects of translation, and train translators for different areas. Graduates of such programs may therefore need to familiarize themselves with NAATI’s requirements before attempting the NAATI test.

## CONCLUSION

The NAATI Translator test falls into the domain of document translation, in which a high level of accuracy and naturalness of expression is stressed. It is a different form of translation from the translation of literary works. NAATI's expectations in its test do not contradict the general rule of conveying the meaning accurately and maintaining naturalness of expression in document translation. Such expectations are not independent of translation practice in the real world. On the contrary, they provide guidelines for professional performance in the domain of document translation. They are also supported by relevant translation theories. NAATI's expectations may also differ from those in translation training programs that are not approved by NAATI. Furthermore, in the real translation world, there are factors that influence the ideal performance of document translation. These factors may relate to the demands of clients, and are likely to be beyond the control of translators. Such demands may be legitimate from the clients' perspective and may need to be taken into consideration by translators. However, candidates attempting the NAATI Translator test should familiarize themselves with NAATI's specific requirements to give themselves the best chance of passing the test. ➤

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "Real translation work" refers here to translation services provided by translators.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, "Translators" with a capital "T" is used to refer to NAATI-accredited Translators, while "translators" refers to practicing translators in general.

<sup>3</sup> The NAATI Translator test also contains ethical questions, but these are not discussed in this article.

<sup>4</sup> International English Language Testing System – a test that measures English language proficiency.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.naati.com.au/annual\\_reports.htm](http://www.naati.com.au/annual_reports.htm), retrieved June 12, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> The actual texts of the Sample Test cannot be reproduced here for reasons of confidentiality.

<sup>7</sup> <http://server.dream-fusion.net/ausit2/pics/ethics.pdf>, retrieved July 9, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> <http://server.dream-fusion.net/ausit2/pics/ethics.pdf>, retrieved July 9, 2005.

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